

# NICARAGUA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion; provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship; and states no one “shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs.”

Throughout the year, President Daniel Ortega and Vice President and First Lady Rosario Murillo ordered the arrest of, forced into exile, and verbally attacked priests and bishops, labelled them “criminals” and “coup-plotters,” and accused them of inciting violence. On August 19, police forcibly entered the diocesan headquarters in the northern town of Matagalpa and detained without an arrest warrant Catholic Bishop Rolando Álvarez, six clergy members, and a layman who had been under de facto house arrest for more than two weeks. In August, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) condemned the “escalating repression against members of the Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua.”

According to media reports, authorities arbitrarily detained at least 11 clergy, including Bishop Álvarez, during the year. According to media outlets, authorities arrested two priests for violent crimes and convicted them in proceedings that included violations of due process. The government withheld passports from Nicaraguan priests, expelled Catholic clergy, nuns, and the Holy See’s Apostolic Nuncio from the country, and forced others into exile. In October, a human rights organization stated, “The violence and brutal persecution of the State against the Catholic Church has caused the exile of at least 55 priests.” Catholic clergy and laity continued to experience government harassment, including slander, arbitrary investigations by government agencies based on charges that clergy and laity said were unfounded, withholding of tax exemptions, and denial of religious services for political prisoners, according to media reports. In February, the National Assembly ordered the closure of the Catholic University of Dry Tropic Farming and Livestock, a university run by a retired Catholic bishop critical of the government. The government revoked the broadcasting licenses of three television stations and 10 radio stations that the Catholic Church operated.

Other reported anti-Catholic activities included death threats, theft of Catholic religious items, and unlawful entry into Catholic churches. In June, a pro-government social media activist disputed the conclusion of a report

describing 190 attacks against the Catholic Church that occurred between April 2018 and May 2022, instead calling them “190 attacks against the Nicaraguan people directed and orchestrated from pulpits.” In August, a comment on a pro-regime Facebook page suggested individuals should beat up Bishop Álvarez and banish him from his parish.

On August 3, the U. S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs tweeted, “Ortega-Murillo’s brutal assault on Catholic clergy, radio facilities, and community members in the northern town of Sébaco is another blow to religious freedom in Nicaragua as well as to the freedom of expression.” In June, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom called on the Ortega government to respect religious freedom of all persons. The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials met regularly with a range of religious actors to discuss restrictions on religious freedom or belief.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Nicaragua a Country of Particular Concern for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.3 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2005 census (the most recent available), conducted by the Nicaraguan Institute of Statistics and Census, 59 percent of the population is Catholic and 22 percent evangelical Protestant, including Pentecostals, Mennonites, Moravian Lutherans, and Baptists. A September CID-Gallup survey found that Catholics and evangelical Protestants constitute 41 and 38 percent of the population, respectively. According to a survey conducted in 2019 by the market research firm Borge and Associates, the percentage of evangelical Protestants is increasing, and the percentage of Catholics is decreasing. Borge and Associates found Catholics make up 43 percent of the population, evangelical Protestants 41 percent, and religious believers without affiliation 14 percent. According to the Borge survey, groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Moravian Lutheran Church, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers.

The Moravian Lutheran Church is largely concentrated in the country's North and South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions. Most of its members are of Indigenous or Afro-Caribbean descent.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship, and it states no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare his or her ideology or beliefs." The constitution states there is no official religion; however, the law entrusts government-controlled, community-level action groups, known as Family Committees, with promoting "Christian values" at the community level.

The requirements for registration of religious groups – except for the Catholic Church, which has an agreement known as a concordat with the government – are similar to those for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In accordance with a March amendment to the law that regulates NGOs, registration requires an application, articles of association, and designation of officers. The National Assembly must approve a group's application for "constitution," or legal standing. Following approval, the group must go through a second approval process with the Ministry of Interior before it can register as an association or NGO, allowing it to incur legal obligations, enter into contracts, and benefit from tax and customs exemptions. Following registration, religious groups are subject to the same regulations as other NGOs or associations.

The Catholic Church is not required to register as a religious group because its presence in the country predates the legislation; however, the government requires organizations dedicated to charity or other social work affiliated with the Catholic Church to register.

By law, organizations and persons receiving resources of foreign origin are barred from participating in domestic politics. The government can fine, imprison, or confiscate or freeze the assets of any person or entity in violation of this law. The law exempts registered religious organizations from the requirement to register

as foreign agents with the Ministry of Interior. By law, those receiving exemptions are barred from participating in or supporting activities related to the country's internal or foreign affairs.

Ministry of Education regulations for primary school education require that the educational goals and curriculum for elementary grade students and teachers follow the government's "Christian, Socialist, and Solidarity" principles. The government's 2021-2026 human development policy recognizes religious activities as part of the country's cultural traditions. The law establishes education in the country as secular but recognizes the right of private schools to be religiously oriented.

Missionaries must obtain religious worker visas and provide information regarding the nature of their missionary work before the Ministry of Interior authorizes their entry into the country. Locally based religious organizations must provide documentation and request travel authorization from the Ministry of Interior prior to the arrival of visiting persons or religious groups. The process must be completed before arrival and generally takes several weeks to complete.

The law regulating telecommunication services provides for imposing fines, not seizing property, to sanction a media outlet that does not meet administrative requirements, including ones affiliated with religious organizations.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

During the year, the government intensified its campaign against the Catholic Church, according to multiple media reports and statements by international organizations. In August, the IACHR condemned the "escalating repression against members of the Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua" and urged the government to "immediately end this violence."

By year's end, the government had arrested 14 individuals linked to the Catholic Church, including eight priests. On August 19, police forcibly entered the diocesan headquarters in Matagalpa and detained without an arrest warrant Catholic Bishop Rolando Álvarez, six other clergy members, and a layman who had

been under de-facto house arrest for more than two weeks. The police took Bishop Álvarez to a private residence in Managua and the seven detainees to a prison commonly referred to as El Chipote, where the government incarcerates and interrogates political prisoners, according to human rights organizations.

According to media, a lack of transparency by judicial authorities contributed to uncertainty surrounding Bishop Álvarez's detention. In an August 5 press release, police stated Bishop Álvarez and others were under criminal investigation for allegedly attempting to organize violent groups to commit "hate crimes" against the population. Police issued the press release hours after two Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) National Assembly members told media outlets that Bishop Álvarez "incited violence." Police detained Bishop Álvarez without filing formal charges against him, and a police press statement issued the same day did not call the detention an arrest, saying only that Bishop Álvarez had committed "destabilizing activities" and had been placed under "house protection." Independent media reported the law does not contemplate "house protection," and police did not explain what the destabilizing activities were. Bishop Álvarez remained under "house protection" for 116 days without charges until December 13, when the Public Prosecutor's Office filed "conspiracy to undermine national integrity" and "spreading fake news" charges against him. A judge ruled the same day to send Bishop Álvarez to "house arrest" until his initial hearing on January 10, 2023.

On September 22, the prosecutor charged the seven other detainees from the Matagalpa Curia with "conspiracy to undermine national integrity" and "spreading fake news." The judge authorized a one-year detention period for the seven, as the Public Prosecutor's Office requested, to investigate and build accusations against them. The seven defendants remained imprisoned at year's end with no public information available regarding the beginning of their trial(s). Legal experts publicly criticized the lack of due process in the initial hearing against the six clergy members and one layman. According to media reports, the court conducted the hearings in secrecy, without permitting the defendants to choose defense lawyers. Police held the detainees incommunicado for long periods of time.

The IACHR said the detention of Bishop Álvarez and others happened "in a context of systematic persecution, criminalization, harassment, police hounding,

stigmatizing comments by State authorities, and, more generally, acts of repression targeting members of the Roman Catholic Church, due to its mediation efforts in the national talks of 2018 and its critical position to denounce human rights violations committed in the context of Nicaragua's ongoing crisis." In August, an exiled journalist from Matagalpa said government officials had pressured him and four other Nicaraguan journalists to discredit Bishop Álvarez publicly to bolster the government's criminal proceeding against him.

On October 13, police arrested Father Enrique Martínez Gamboa, a priest with the Saint Marta Parish in Managua, and charged him with "conspiracy" and "spreading fake news." On August 14, police arrested Father Óscar Danilo Benavidez, a priest at the Holy Spirit Parish in Mulukukú in the Caribbean region, after he gave a Sunday homily asking the congregation to pray for the country and for Bishop Álvarez. The following day, the Public Prosecutor's Office asked a judge to grant it a 90-day detention period for Benavidez. Media outlets reported that on December 11, authorities detained two Catholic journalists from the Matagalpa Diocese who had worked with Bishop Álvarez. Both journalists remained imprisoned at year's end.

Authorities arrested and convicted two other Catholic priests under the criminal code, charging Monsignor Leonardo Urbina with sexual abuse of a minor and Father Manuel García with assaulting a woman and threatening a group of men with a weapon. Legal experts said both proceedings lacked due process, including failing to respect the presumption of innocence and denying access to privately appointed defense lawyers. Independent media and human rights organizations denounced both cases as politically motivated.

In August, prosecutors charged Monsignor Urbina, priest at the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the department of Boaco, with raping a 14-year-old girl. Contrary to laws protecting minor victims of sexual abuse, authorities allowed pro-regime media outlets in the courtroom. Despite Urbina's requests to name a personal attorney, authorities assigned him a pro-regime public defender. On September 1, the judge found Urbina guilty and sentenced him to 30 years in prison, the maximum sentence available for the charge under the penal code.

In June, a Granada district court judge convicted Father Manuel García of assault and battery of a woman and threatening five men with a machete. The judge

sentenced García to two years and eight months in prison for assault and battery and two years in prison, plus a fine of 14,116 córdobas (\$400) for threatening the men. According to media reports, police arrested García on June 1, after pro-regime social media accounts posted videos of the alleged victim accusing García of attacking her. The pro-regime accounts also posted a video of García brandishing a machete at a group of men who stood behind the parish's fence and threatened to enter the parish's perimeter. Independent media released additional footage – which postings on pro-regime accounts had omitted – that showed the group of men chanting death threats at Garcia. The alleged victim recanted her testimony against García, stating that he hit her by accident and that she did not feel threatened. She refused to sign the police report containing her initial allegations of assault and battery, but prosecutors used her original testimony against García and subsequently charged her with, and imprisoned her for, perjury.

During the year, the government expelled, forced into exile, or forced into hiding numerous Catholic clergy due to police harassment and fear of governmental repression. On March 12, the government expelled the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag. Bishop Carlos Herrera, president of the Conference of Bishops of Nicaragua, said to media the government expelled Sommertag after he asked it to release political prisoners.

In May, Father Harving Padilla of the Saint John the Baptist Parish in Masaya went into hiding after police officers and vehicles surrounded his parish and closed street access, intimidating churchgoers through questioning and preventing Padilla from leaving the church for 10 days. The Managua Archdiocese formed a special clerical committee to escort Padilla out of the parish together with police on May 24. Padilla did not appear or speak out publicly after that date. On June 16, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet referred to the incident during a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council, stating that police had “resumed harassment of Catholic priests, persistently following and intimidating them. Two were surrounded in their churches by police officers, and parishioners were forbidden entry.”

On September 6, Father Uriel Vallejos, priest of the Divine Mercy Parish in Sébaco, announced on social media his decision to go into exile after police harassed and threatened him. For three days in August, police surrounded Vallejos' clerical

residence in Sébaco, preventing him from leaving the premises or receiving deliveries of food and water. Authorities suspended water and electricity services to the clerical residence and the parish. National telecommunications regulator TELCOR closed Sébaco's Catholic television channel and radio station, for which Vallejos had served as director. On December 14, media reported prosecutors had charged Vallejos in absentia with crimes of "conspiracy" and "spreading fake news" and delivered a warrant for his arrest to Interpol.

On September 16, leading independent daily newspaper *La Prensa* reported Honduran Bishop José Canales had spoken with approximately 50 priests seeking to leave the country due to harassment, requesting reassignment to Honduras or Costa Rica. Bishop Silvio Báez, Father Edwing Román, and other priests remained in exile.

In September and October, the government denied three Catholic priests entry into the country after they traveled abroad: José Cuesta, a Panamanian who resided in Nicaragua and served as the director of a private Catholic school; Nicaraguan Dayvis López from Saint Gregory Magnus Parish in Diriamba; and Nicaraguan Guillermo Blandón from Saint Lucia Parish in Boaco. In all three cases, airline officials notified the priests during check-in that the government had not authorized their entry and prevented them from boarding the airplane. The government denied at least two other Nicaraguan priests entry into the country under similar circumstances during the year, as well as other priests and evangelical Protestant pastors of foreign nationality seeking to visit the country for religious purposes. The government denied Jorge Huete, Nicaraguan national and vice rector of the Jesuit Central American University (UCA), entry into the country on September 27, after he tried to return from an academic event abroad. Authorities also denied entry to the former rector of UCA, Father José Idiáquez, in June after he traveled abroad for medical treatment. Idiáquez's passport expired while he was abroad, and the Nicaraguan consulate in Mexico denied his passport renewal request.

On October 4, a human rights organization issued a report on state abuses of Catholic institutions in the country, stating, "The violence and brutal persecution of the State against the Catholic Church has caused the exile of at least 55 priests" and "multiple legal proceedings, all of which has happened in the last two months." According to press and social media reports, Catholic priests



throughout the country continued to experience harassment from police and government supporters who acted with police. According to media reports based on anonymous interviews with Catholic priests, police and FSLN supporters surveilled priests, who feared complaining publicly about the arbitrary intimidation. Pro-regime actors attended masses to monitor sermons, preventing some services from taking place due to intimidation. Leaders of other faith-based groups reported the use of similar tactics, including video and audio recordings of homilies, by what they called government supporters who had been “infiltrated” into congregations. Catholic clergy reported large groups of police and parapolice gathered around church premises and took pictures to intimidate priests and churchgoers in several cities throughout the country.

Clergy abruptly cancelled a courtesy call with the U.S. Ambassador in March when a large group of police and parapolice surrounded their parish on the morning of the scheduled meeting. Police carried rifles and shotguns. The regularly scheduled Mass that day took place with police standing by the entrance of the parish observing those who entered or exited. Police remained outside the church through the following day.

According to media reports, police continued surveilling Archbishop of Managua Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes’s home. Police also reportedly photographed all individuals who entered the cardinal’s home, including priests, installed a permanent police guard house outside his residence, and designated two police vehicles to follow Brenes everywhere he went. An anonymous source told media that Brenes had been under police surveillance for several years but that the relationship between the cardinal and the government had become more hostile since the prodemocracy protests in 2018.

According to evangelical Protestants, government surveillance, harassment, and threats extended to their community as well. Evangelical Protestant pastors also received threats that limited their religious freedom, including their ability to speak freely in sermons. Evangelical Protestant communities reported police limited their ability to convene for certain church events. Many Protestant leaders said they lacked support networks and were reluctant to report government repression.

In March, a large government-owned trailer serving as a mobile clinic was parked for several days in front of the Catholic parish in Masatepe, hindering access to the main church entrance. Churchgoers complained to media, stating the trailer was retaliation for the priest's call for prayers for Ukraine.

Bans on religious celebrations continued throughout the year. Multiple Catholic parishes reported they did not celebrate traditional pilgrimages of local patron saints and other religious processions in their communities because authorities did not grant them the necessary permits to use public streets. The parishes either suspended or confined the religious festivities to church premises. In August, police cited "internal security" as justification for denying authorization for a Catholic pilgrimage in Managua in honor of Our Lady of Fátima. According to multiple reports throughout the year, police forces prevented churchgoers from attending Mass in various Catholic churches around the country. In August, a police officer impeded priests from the municipalities of Rancho Grande and El Tuma from travelling to Matagalpa to participate in religious activities. In September, media reported police banned the annual activities for the "Day of the Bible," usually celebrated in public spaces by evangelical Protestant churches throughout the country.

During the year, the government revoked the operating licenses of more than 3,000 NGOs, including faith-based organizations, claiming a lack of compliance with anti-money laundering legislation, among other allegations, which independent observers deemed spurious. On February 2, the National Assembly revoked the operating license of several organizations associated with the Catholic Church, including the Estelí chapter of Caritas.

Religiously affiliated NGOs said the Ministry of Interior, responsible for regulating nonprofit organizations, imposed excessive administrative burdens, including requirements to submit monthly financial reports, renew monthly tax-exemption and banking services certifications, and restrictions on their ability to receive funding directly from international donors. These NGOs reported operational limitations grew during the reporting period, in some cases rendering the organization inoperable. The ministry continued to deny or delay legally required permits and tax exemption approvals to certain religiously affiliated NGOs. Some NGOs reported a decline in donations because parishioners feared government retribution for "financing terrorism." Administrative burdens forced several

evangelical Protestant churches to close or merge with other evangelical churches to continue operating. The Ministry of Interior claimed it had not received compliance documentation and delayed providing certifications for some evangelical churches, according to civil society organizations.

On June 29, the National Assembly canceled the operating license of the Missionaries of Charity, an international organization of nuns founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and expelled the 18 nuns, whom police and immigration authorities escorted across the Costa Rican border. According to media reports, government authorities accused the nuns of failing to comply with laws that prevented money laundering and financing terrorism. The government closed all Missionaries of Charity programs – which had operated in the country for more than 30 years – including a shelter for young women who were victims of violence, a home for abandoned elderly persons, and a daycare center for children of single working mothers and other low-income workers. Government authorities, aided by police, seized the organization's property and prevented the nuns from donating their belongings to the needy. In September, the government expelled the Religious Sisters of the Cross nuns, who served the Matagalpa Diocese. According to a source close to the congregation, the nuns experienced months of government harassment and pressure regarding the congregation's financial contributions and arbitrary denials of applications to renew residency permits for the congregation's foreign nuns.

Similar government-imposed administrative burdens forced the closure of dozens of other faith-based organizations. In May, the National Assembly revoked the operating licenses of NGOs responsible for editing the monthly newspaper *La Voz Catolica*, which published messages from Pope Francis, biblical passages, and information on the Catholic Church's activities. The Ministry of Interior requested the NGOs' accounting books in 2019 but never returned them, according to media reports.

Sources reported that the Ministry of Interior continued to deny tax exemptions to Caritas, an international Catholic NGO accredited to the country since 1965. The Ministry of Interior began denying the tax exemptions to Caritas in 2018, and in 2019, Caritas asked supporters to stop sending donations because it was unable to retrieve them from Customs. Caritas continued to report that since 2018, it had not received from the Ministry of Interior its annual certificate

authorizing it to operate in the country. Caritas sources said the failure to renew the certificate prevented the organization from receiving tax exemptions, prohibited the importation of materials, and hindered its ability to bring in medical missions as part of the social services it provides to Nicaraguans. Caritas reduced its social services because of harassment from government supporters in the communities where it worked.

Catholic clergy reported that the government continued to deny them access to prisons – a practice started shortly after the 2018 prodemocracy protests – except for a small number of reportedly government-aligned priests who were allowed access. Catholic clergy said that before 2018, they had regularly entered prisons to celebrate Mass and provide communion and confession to detainees. The regime denied political prisoners access to Bibles. After a family visit, the mother of a political prisoner told media that prison authorities ordered inmates to remain silent when they attempted to pray.

In February, the National Assembly revoked the operating license of the Catholic University of Dry Tropic Farming and Livestock, a private university run by retired Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata. According to media reports, government authorities also cancelled the legal status of the Diocese of Estelí Agriculture and Livestock Technical Institute (ITADE) and the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua, affiliated with the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua. Following the cancellation of their legal status on February 2, the Ministry of Education took over the ITADE and Polytechnic University campuses. Since the 2018 prodemocracy demonstrations, authorities have reduced the annual national budget allocation for the Jesuit-founded UCA. During the year, UCA received one million córdobas (\$27,700), compared with 100 million córdobas (\$2.8 million) that it received in 2021. Media outlets reported UCA authorities informed students due to the reduction in funds, the university was unable to provide the usual number of scholarships. In March, the National Assembly amended the law regulating university-level education and the National Council of Universities, excluding UCA from the council and thereby depriving it of a share of the six percent of the national budget for higher education granted by law. Experts interpreted the decision as government retaliation against UCA for its support of prodemocracy protests in 2018.

During the year, telecommunications regulator TELCOR ordered the closure of 10 local Matagalpa Catholic Diocese radio stations and three Catholic television

channels. TELCOR did not provide justification for the television closures; independent media called the decisions arbitrary. TELCOR said the Catholic radio stations did not meet the technical requirements to be on air or have licenses and therefore could not broadcast. The diocese of Matagalpa disputed TELCOR's rationale, stating that Bishop Álvarez had submitted the required licensing documentation in 2016. TELCOR did not grant the radio stations the remediation period the law requires, according to media reports. Police enforced TELCOR's closure of Radio Católica by raiding the radio station and adjacent chapel and confiscating its equipment without a court order. During the raid, police broke the locks to the parish, destroyed the parish doors, and attacked parishioners as they fled the church and surrounding areas. According to media reports and civil society accounts on social media, police fired bullets into the air, detonated tear gas canisters into the crowd, and beat individuals who tried to protest the attack against the church. According to one report, several individuals suffered severe injuries. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the government to immediately cease the abuse and stop the repression.

Two evangelical Protestant media outlets remained inoperative after their licenses were revoked in 2021: television station Channel 21, the only channel in the country that since 1991 had exclusively broadcast local and foreign evangelical programs, and radio station Nexo. The family of evangelical Protestant pastor and former presidential candidate Guillermo Osorno owned both outlets. The government closed them the day after Osorno – whose party ran in an alliance with the governing FSLN in the November 2021 national elections – gave a press conference during which he denounced irregularities in the electoral process.

Authorities continued to hold the passports of Monsignor Silvio Fonseca and another priest, preventing them from leaving the country. Fonseca visited the immigration authority several times during the year to check on the status of his passport. Immigration authorities reportedly told Fonseca in 2021 that his passport failed to scan properly, but Fonseca said he had used the same passport without any problems when he traveled abroad four months prior.

The government continued its selective restriction on some foreign religious visitors to the country based on the perceived political affiliation of the visitor's local sponsor.

In multiple speeches during the year, President Ortega and Vice President Murillo criticized Catholic clergy and accused them of inciting violence and backing an alleged coup against the government in 2018, a reference to the prodemocracy protests. On January 24, Vice President Murillo called Catholic leaders “destructive” and accused them of “twisting the word of God for their own benefit.” She said the clergy’s condemnation of human rights violations in the country were “blessings to terrorism.” On May 22, Juan Carlos Ortega, son of Ortega and Murillo, tweeted, “Under every cassock there is an ordinary man, filled with viciousness, avariciousness, and wicked thoughts.” In her press briefing on August 5, Murillo called for those committing “crimes against spirituality” to be thrown in jail, in apparent reference to Bishop Álvarez. In her August 6 press briefing, she attacked Bishop Álvarez, referring to him as a “manipulator of religious symbols.” On September 28, Ortega called the Catholic Church a “perfect dictatorship” during a public speech.

On May 18, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Managua issued a statement expressing concerns about the lack of peace in the country since April 2018.

In May, pro-regime radio commentator William Grigsby said there was proof to demonstrate the “participation of priests and bishops in terrorist acts” in the country. He singled out prominent clergy, including Father Padilla, Bishops Álvarez, Mata, and Báez and Cardinal Brenes, stating they were all involved in various criminal acts.

On May 4, the National Assembly approved a report from its Legislative Commission that recommended an increase in prison sentences and the creation of new penalties for cybercrimes and treason, offenses the government had used to prosecute leaders. The report also said religious leaders had promoted the “attempted coup of 2018,” a reference to the prodemocracy protests of April 2018. The report stated Catholic priests were criminals and coup-mongers, echoing language the President and Vice President had used since 2018. The report included a request from a group of alleged victims of the 2018 protestor violence to prosecute religious leaders for their involvement in the rallies and to investigate religious communities for alleged crimes committed in 2018.

The government organized and sponsored local religious activities through FSLN-controlled municipal governments for Holy Week, as it had done in prior years. During the Saint Dominic celebrations in August, the government used a replica image of the statue of Saint Dominic normally carried in Catholic processions. Vice President Murillo promoted faith-based activities organized by the government in her daily radio remarks.

Catholic clergy continued to report they believed the government directed or encouraged vandalism and the desecration of churches. According to local media, in June, unidentified individuals broke into a Catholic church in the community of Bocana de Paiwas, on the south Caribbean coast, and stole the communion wafers. In January, a parish in Managua reported trespassers broke into church premises, damaging the windows and forcing open the doors. The priests in charge of the parish said they were victims of sacrilege and desecration.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Reported anti-Catholic activities included insults, death threats, burglary of Catholic religious items, and unlawful entry into Catholic churches. In June, Edwin Suárez, a well-known progovernment social media activist with 19,000 Twitter followers, disputed the conclusion of a report documenting 190 attacks on the Catholic Church between April 2018 and May 2022, instead calling them “190 attacks against the Nicaraguan people directed and orchestrated from pulpits.” He also accused Catholic priests of hiding weapons in their churches.

In August, a comment on a pro-regime Facebook page suggested Nicaraguans should beat up Bishop Álvarez and banish him from his parish.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials collaborated with senior Department of State officials to convey, publicly and privately, concerns about restrictions of religious freedom in the country. Embassy officials did not have meetings with the government on the subject of religious freedom.

On August 3, the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs tweeted, “Ortega-Murillo’s brutal assault on Catholic clergy, radio facilities, and

community members in Sébaco is another blow to religious freedom in Nicaragua as well as to the freedom of expression. How can men and women in uniform – many of them people of faith – carry out such orders?”

In June, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom said in a televised interview the United States was concerned about the Nicaraguan government’s use of mobs to intimidate and harass Catholic priests. He called on the Ortega-Murillo government to respect the religious freedom of all persons. In August, he tweeted, “We condemn the attack on the Sébaco parish. Father Uriel Vallejos remains isolated in the rectory after riot police illegally occupied the church and mishandled church property. The Ortega-Murillo regime must end repression of Catholic clergy and respect all places of worship.” The Ambassador at Large also tweeted in August that the government must follow Nicaragua’s constitution and allow prisoners access to sacred texts. In September, on the margins of the UN General Assembly, he called on the government to release priests it had unjustly detained so they could return to their pastoral missions.

Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met regularly with senior religious leaders. At these meetings, embassy representatives raised concerns regarding limitations on freedom of religion or belief and the government’s retaliation against religious groups who voiced beliefs that contradicted government rhetoric.

On November 30, 2022, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State designated Nicaragua a “Country of Particular Concern” for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.